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Is a Love of Dogs Mostly a Matter of Where You Live?

A new study finds huge differences between nations in preferences for pets.

Posted Aug 01, 2019

My [friend](#) Nyaga Mwanki is a retired professor of anthropology at Western Carolina University where I worked. His son Munene and my daughters Betsy and Katie are the same age, and Nyaga was their soccer coach back when our kids were in first grade. Nyaga was born in Kana village on the slopes of Mount Kenya.

I once asked him if there were dogs around when he was growing up in Africa. He told me that dogs roamed freely in his village. Fierce dogs, he said, were highly valued because they could scare off strangers and wild animals. But he made it clear that these dogs were not viewed as companions. They were not allowed to enter houses or fed at dinner tables or sleep in beds. Indeed, there is not even a word in his native language for the category of animals we call [pets](#).

Why Do Some People Love Pets and Not Others?

For a long time, I have been intrigued by the question, “why do some people love pets and others don’t.” Factors such as [gender](#), [personality](#), and [even genes](#) are related to pet-ownership. But geography also counts. In Idaho, for example, 58% of households include a dog compared to only 24% of homes in Connecticut.

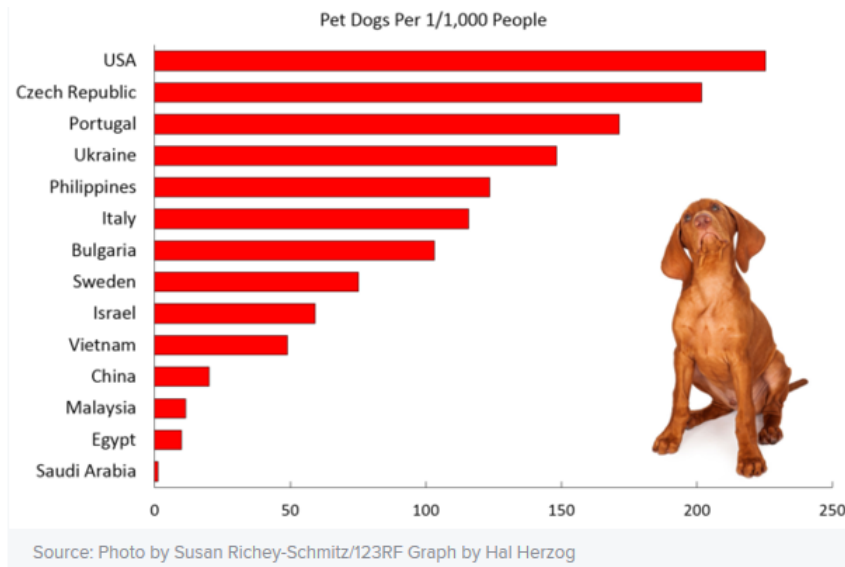
Dr. Andrew Rowan and I recently investigated differences between nations in rates of dog ownership. Andrew is President of [WellBeing International](#), and he has been amassing material on global dog populations for years. Several months ago, he sent me a treasure trove of data on dog ownership in 70 countries. This information comes from a variety of sources including Euromonitor International (a global market research organization), Dr. Matthew Gompper (an animal ecologist) and the European Pet Food Industry Federation. I spent the next couple of months going over the spreadsheets, and we recently presented the results of our analysis at the 2019 annual meeting of the [International Society for Anthrozoology](#). I was stunned by the magnitude of the differences we found between countries in the roles of dogs in human lives.

How Many Dogs Are On Earth And Where Do They Live?

Experts disagree about how many dogs live on our planet. Psychology Today blogger [Stanley Coren](#) [calculated](#) that there are at least 525 million dogs on earth, though he admits that this is probably an underestimate. Other researchers think that if you include free-ranging “street dogs” the number is much higher. Indeed, Andrew Rowan, Matthew Gompper, and Ray and Lorna Coppinger independently concluded that there are a roughly a billion dogs running around the earth. That’s one dog for every seven and a half humans.

These billion or so dogs, however, are not evenly distributed around the globe. Take, for example, Euromonitor’s estimates of pet-dog ownership in 53 countries. Among these nations, there were, on average, 109 pet dogs per 1,000 people. But as shown in the graph below, the differences between countries are huge.

The United States leads the pack with 225 dogs per 1,000 people. With only 1.3 pet dogs per 1,000 people, Saudi Arabia is at the bottom. In the ten most dog-loving countries, there are about 200 dogs per 1,000 people compared to 20 dogs per 1,000 people in the ten least dog-loving countries. Indeed, if you live in



the United States, the chance you have a dog in your life is twice as great as it is if you live in France, and 20 times greater than if you live in India.

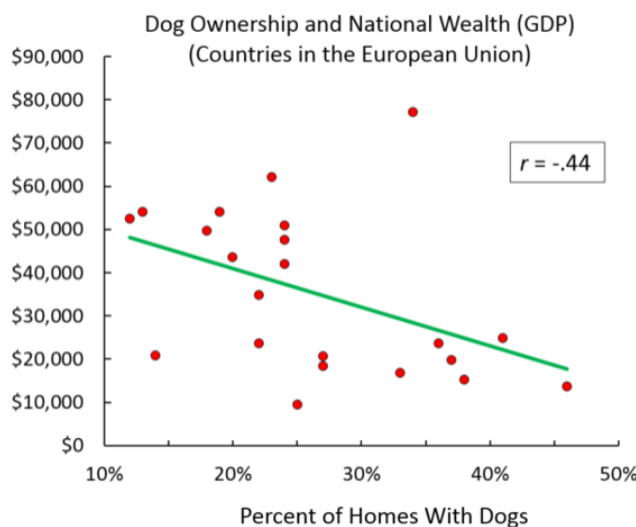
Why Do Some Nations Have More Dogs Than Others?

Why are dogs loved in some countries and loathed in other? Some historians have argued that pet-keeping often originates as a pastime of the wealthy which, over time, filters down to the lower classes. This idea suggests

that pet-keeping should be more common in wealthier nations than in poorer countries. To my surprise, this is not the case with dogs. Take the nations in the European Union. With a per capita GDP of \$54,135, Sweden is one of the richest nations in Europe. Yet only 12% of Swedish households include a dog. In contrast, with a per capita GDP of \$13,669, Romania is among the poorest of European countries, but 46% of Romanian homes include a dog. The relationship between GDP and dog ownership in the EU is shown in this scatterplot. For stat-geeks, the correlation coefficient was considerably larger and in the opposite direction than I would have predicted ($r = -.44$).

Religion Affects Our Relationships with Dogs

Aspects of culture such as [religion](#) play a big role in human attitudes towards dogs. In some branches of Islam, for example, dogs are in the category of unclean creatures. Our spreadsheets included data on dog



populations in 12 predominantly Islamic countries. To control for differences in national wealth, we matched each of these countries with the non-Islamic country with the most similar GDP. Including both free-ranging and pet dogs, there were nearly three times more dogs per 1,000 people in the 12 non-Islamic nations than the primarily Islamic countries (160 dogs versus 60 dogs per 1,000 people).

Dog Nations and Cat Nations?

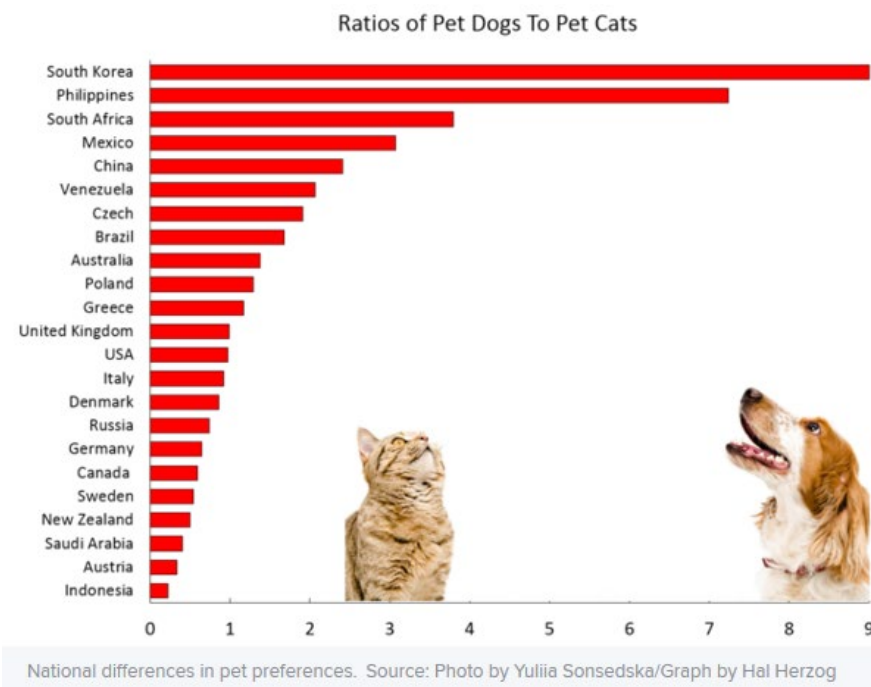
Many studies have found differences in the personalities of “dog people” and “cat people.” But are there also “dog nations” and “cat nations”? According to 2014 Euromonitor data from 47 nations, the answer is yes. In terms of the sheer number of animals, Americans like dogs and cats about equally, with a very slight preference for

cats. (The dog/cat ratio in the US is .97 to 1.) And worldwide, there are 1.3 pet dogs for every cat. But some

nations show more marked preferences for canine and feline pets. While there are comparatively few people who own pets in India, those that do are ten times as likely to live with a dog than a cat. Among the most dog-loving nations are South Korea (9 pet dogs per cat), and the Philippines (7.2 pet dogs per cat). On the other hand, in Indonesia, Switzerland, Austria, and Turkey there are three or four cats for every dog.

Attitudes toward Pets Can Change Rapidly

Nyaga Mwaniki's son Munene was born and raised in the United States, and he has followed in his footsteps. Like his dad, he earned a Ph.D., and, like his father, he is a member of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Western Carolina University. I was curious to know if he also shared his father's early distaste for dogs as family members so I recently sent him an email. He quickly wrote back...



Currently, I have two dogs that have the run of the house... They have a way of growing on you, and they're nice to cuddle with on the couch or in bed. They also go over to my parents and are allowed upstairs and on the furniture, and my dad likes to hold them on the couch and play with them. All in all, he's changed a lot in how he sees dogs, and I think Kenyan society is changing as well."

And in a later email, Nyaga described changes in Kenya in recent years regarding attitudes towards dogs and cats.

Increased Westernization, not so much in the rural areas compared to urban centers, has had a strong impact on people's attitudes towards pets. For many people in the rural areas with very low incomes keeping pets and caring for them is a financial burden. Even the families who may have dogs or cats people let them feed themselves and they are not even let in the house. Some survive on the food that is thrown away. Among the wealthy families the story is very different. Pets are fed the way we do here and are also taken to the Vets. And of course they are allowed into the house and even share the beds.

And with increased insecurity and house break-ins, particularly in the urban areas, more families are beginning to keep guard dogs. They are usually kept in closed dog houses during day time and let out at night but stay outside. The reason they are kept in closed dog houses during day time is to prevent them from becoming familiar with the would-be robbers or strangers.

Their comments nicely show that while our attitudes toward pets are still largely a matter of geography, under the right circumstances, they can change rapidly.

References

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